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ABSTRACT

In this paper, a general conceptual framework for the role of consultant in the Bureau of Program Development and Diffusion as an education extension agent is presented. The key elements of the definition are (1) service, (2) local school system advocacy, and (3) developmental leadership. The operational definitions for each are viewed as relatively fixed. However, each consultant, through future inservice training and considerable introspection, will elaborate his own day-to-day style. In the final analysis, there is no set role definition applicable to every consultant. Each consultant must, therefore, operationalize his own role. (Author)

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The Role of the Program Development and Diffusion Consultant as an Education Extension Agent

Rhode Island Department of Education
Division of Academic Services
Bureau of Program Development and Diffusion

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The Role of the Program Development and Diffusion Consultant as an Education Extension Agent

The purpose of this paper is to define the role of the Bureau of Program Development and Diffusion Consultant as an Education Extension Agent. This role is a dynamic one, constantly subject to review and analysis as the contexts in which the consultant operates change.

Sieber[1] notes that an adequate and well communicated role statement is critical to the operation of the extension agent. This common sense statement is considerably more problematical than one would think. The concept of the extension agent stems from the U.S. Department of Agriculture extension system wherein an agent served as a linker between the farmer and the university based researcher. In essence, the agent had a tangible commodity (a crop, fertilizer, method, etc.) to convey to the potential user (client). If the farmer accepted the services of the extension agent as directed, he could, barring an act of God, see concrete results relatively soon (an improved crop and greater profits). When the concept of extension agent is applied to general educational improvement, the nature of the role becomes less clear. The agricultural extension agent is successful in disseminating innovative practices because of the similarity between the research environment and the environment of the implementation site. The

[1]Sieber, Sam D., Field Agent Roles in Education, New York: Bureau of Applied Social Research, 1972

education extesnion agent, however, is faced with the problem of introducing innovation into a different environment (different philosophy, teachers, etc.) Therefore, his role is more complicated than that of the agricultural extension agent. His task is to help the client adapt successful innovations to the peculiarities or idiosyncrasies of his environment (school system). Havelock and others have done much to establish broad conceptual frameworks for the expanded role of an extension agent or field agent (field agent in that he goes in the field to the client rather than expecting the client to come to him). Yet, specific role definitions are still largely unavailable. The basic problem is that the extension agent in this expanded context must deal with the affective implications of educational processes or methods as well as the cognitive operations of a given process or method.

If a client has a particular problem, the consultant must not assume a dominant role in selecting the solution, but rather must offer the client alternatives from which a particular solution may be selected. This process of supplying alternatives itself is only part of the consultant's job. A large part of his role is interactions with other people. He must not only know about products and processes, but he must also be able to service effectively the client and work easily and effectively with other people. Unfortunately, there is no single best method for interacting with a wide variety of people.

Consequently, a role definition for the education extension agent must be stated in "operational" terms, i.e., in terms of existing conditions and subject to constant revision, even though broad conceptual guidelines can be established. The role definition presented here is based on certain

general guidelines derived from a study of existing conceptual formulations and operational descriptions, but allows necessary freedom for a consultant to build on his personal strengths when interacting with his clients.

The definition of a consultant in the Bureau of Program Development and Diffusion is operationalized in terms of the following key concepts. These are:

(1) Service

(2) Local school system advocacy

(3) Developmental leadership

These concepts should be thought of as sequential and complementary. The concept of service is the one essential ingredient in the successful operation of the education extension agent. However, given the possibility of an existing relationship between the consultant and a given client, it is possible that the consultant may be starting from anywhere along the continuum of service to leadership.

The central theme underlying the three concepts is a primary emphasis on process skills rather than specialized subject matter expertise. It is reasonably clear that the role of the subject matter specialist or expert (at least as it has operated within the State Department of Education) has become an ever more demanding and frustrating role. Few subject matter specialists can be expected to maintain the high level of competency and mastery of current information of their specialties that will gurantee that they can bring to the LEAs a greater competency than is already present in the LEA or elsewhere. This is largely because of the proliferation of knowledge and ever-increasing subdivision within content areas as new specialties develop. Even within a single field, the particular needs of potential clients

may well exceed the content knowledge of the consultant". Given this situation, how can one possibly be expected to become a generalist in all fields?

The key terms are knowledge (content knowledge) and process. No agent could hope to become a "content generalist". In a very real sense, the consultant must become a "process generalist". He must develop process skills such as needs analysis, program planning, information retrieval, dissemination and change strategies, research and evaluation techniques and interpersonal communications skills. Said in another way, the consultant must be able to help his client determine his problem, bring to him available data and resources so that he can develop alternative solutions, make decisions, implement programs and evaluate the results. Looked at from this perspective, one can keep up with major processes and apply them across the broad range of content specialties. The process generalist draws from all available "content specialists" and helps his client best utilize this knowledge. While no one consultant may possess a high degree of competency in all process skills, it is imperative that a team of consultants collectively possess all these process skills.

Before discussing the three key concepts mentioned earlier, one final point concerning the place of the content specialist should be made. Content specialization or subject matter expertise will not diminish. In fact, it may increase as clients more efficiently utilize process generalists (i.e., needed content expertise may be more clearly defined). The consultant should perform a linkage function between the practitioner and content specialists. He should be able to call upon content specialists in

institutions of higher education, research laboratories, State Departments of Education, or wherever located. The key point here is that the consultant know where to find appropriate content matter expertise rather than be expected to provide it himself. If the consultant himself is the appropriate content source, he need go no further. He is not expected to give up his content specialization. He should be operating in a matrix in which his primary role is that of a process specialist, who from time to time may be called on to operate as a content specialist. The above role is much more realistic and considerably less frustrating than the specialist role, in that the agent uses his unique expertise as well as that of any other appropriate specialists required. Problem solving, in reality, rarely is a "one man show".

I Service

Service, as used here, refers to two major types of functions: (1) linkage functions and (2) resource utilization functions. Service is viewed as a dynamic concept on a continuum with the concept of leadership, that is, the consultant provides services as needed and used his linkage role to establish his own credibility and ultimately to develop his own and his client's leadership potential.

Due to the wide variety of talents and resources available within the respective LEA's, particular role descriptions are difficult. With some LEAs, consultants may bring in talents and/or skills which do not exist in the district. In this case he must help link the district to needed resources and perhaps even show key district personnel how to use such resources. In other larger districts, the consultant may discover that

considerable resources and resident expertise is available. In this case, his primary function may involve resource utilization -- assistance in developing the most efficient processes or techniques for using existing talent and resources. Neither of the above examples is likely to be found in a pure state. Probably both types of service functions will be required to varying degrees. The following specific services are given as examples, others could be added and not all may be used in each case. They are:

a. Assistance in the assessment of educational needs and the establishment of educational priorities.

b. Demonstration and diffusion of innovative and validated educational practices.

c. Assistance in clarifying, retrieving and interpreting information in order that LEA's may initiate and evaluate educational practices and policies using an improved and increased data base.

d. Assistance in planning and implementing inservice training.

e. Assistance in program/project planning and writing.

f. Identification of specialists who may assist in district areas of curriculum planning and in technical matters.

II. Local School System Advocacy

This is a relatively new concept in the State Department of Education. Formerly, consultants within the Division of Academic Services have maintained their ties with LEAs in terms of regulatory or administrative functions. Related services were rendered largely by those same persons responsible for federal program administration. Consequently, the LEA

view of the SDE consultant has been that he is more supervisory than advisory and more a monitor than an advocate or helper.

The new role suggested here calls for the consultant to act as advisor to and advocate for the LEA. In this capacity, he will advise the LEA as to funding priorities, provide necessary information for proposal development, assist in proposal preparation and then serve as advocate of the proposal when it is presented to the appropriate SDE agency or board. He will support any proposal wholeheartedly, even if the LEA decides to develop a low priority item for their proposal.

The present organizational changes within the SDE should further assist the consultant in maintaining his advisory as opposed to supervisory role. The Bureau of Federal and State Program Administration (the source of categorical and competitive funds) is now separate from the Bureau of Program Development and Diffusion (the source of project developmental assistance). Though not a pure dichotomy, the separation should assist the development of the philosophy of advocacy. The consultant in the Bureau of Program Development and Diffusion must, in order to be consistent with the mission of the Bureau and the service area concept, represent the LEA (advocate for the LEA) when seeking funds from the Bureau of Federal and State Program Administration. However, he must insure that the consultants from the Bureau of Federal and State Program Administration are involved as early as possible in the program development process. Process skills associated with advocacy -- interpersonal communication and human relations program development, project proposal writing and a knowledge of funding sources -- must be provided.

III. Leadership

As noted in the previous section, leadership is closely related to the consultant's ability to deliver service effectively. The key dimension of leadership as operationalized here is leadership development.

The willingness of the consultant to be a local school system advocate together with his successful delivery of service should establish his credibility and help establish the trust and confidence he needs to become an effective leader. In turn, as he functions increasingly as a leader, the demands for increased services and his commitment to local system advocacy are reinforced. Thus, although service is the essential ingredient of successful consultant operation, it can be seen that the three concepts of service, LEA advocacy, and leadership are complementary in addition to being sequential.

Leadership development suggests that: (a) the consultant's own leadership ability is developmental and (b) his ability to develop leadership within the school system to maintain new programs should be also developmental. He may begin his contact with his client either by responding to local requests for assistance or initiating the contact himself. As noted above, his ability to deliver services and build mutual trust and respect will lead him into direct leadership. In this sense consultant leadership is developmental. Also, the consultant should build internal leadership abilities as well as his own so that new programs may become internalized and likely to persist after he leaves.

In this paper a general conceptual framework for the role of consultant in the Bureau of Program Development and Diffusion as an education extension agent has been presented. The key elements of the definition

are: (1) service, (2) local school system advocacy, and (3) developmental leadership. The operational definitions for each are viewed as relatively fixed. However, each consultant, through future inservice training and considerable introspection, must elaborate his own day-to-day style. In the final analysis, there is no set role definition applicable to every consultant. Each consultant must, therefore, operationalize his own role.